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tradition of hostility. Such groups obviously have both equal and mutually independent status.

The Processes of Mossi Joking

I have already suggested that the significance of joking as an adjustive mechanism is derived from the manner in which it provides concurrently for the operation of three interrelated but analytically separable processes. These are *communication, control,* and *catharsis.*

As a means of communication, joking provides a permissive and flexible context in which a grievance can be expressed, thus allowing for its rectification and the restoration of amity. As a means of control, the public nature of most joking serves to shame the object of the jocular offensive, to invoke social pressure for his conformity, and to elicit support for the complainant. As a means of catharsis, the joking expression of aggressive feelings reduces frustration and thus serves indirectly to perpetuate the amicable aspect of the relationship in which it occurs.

Joking also gives pleasure. The feeling of triumphant release that follows the successful—and safe—expression of hostile sentiments probably functions to reinforce reliance on joking as an adjustive mechanism. And the intrinsic pleasure of wit may also explain the persistence of joking behavior in the absence of an immediate "structural need" for it.

A more detailed description of one of the relationships already mentioned—sibling-in-law joking—will serve to illustrate these several points. Because of its relation to the pivotal institution of marriage, sibling-in-law joking is perhaps the most frequently used adjustive mechanism in Mossi social structure. The potential for marital conflict is high. This appears to be due to the combined factors of a sexually differentiated enculturative experience that results in marked dissimilarities in adult male and female personality; to an age difference between husbands and wives of at least ten years; to the classic stresses of polygyny; to the subordinate status of Mossi women, particularly of junior wives within their husband's patriclan; and to the possible dissatisfaction of a woman's parents, particularly her mother, at the loss of their daughter's services or at the inadequacy of bride-wealth payments.

Whatever its origins in a specific instance, it is important that this potential for conflict be controlled, for each marriage extends the network of affinal and cognatic ties that link the patrilineage to the larger community. Given a persistent potential for strife, the preservation of marital stability requires the provision of a means for minimizing its deleterious effects. When conflict occurs, the resultant frustration must be reduced, and accord must be reestablished in a manner that does no serious damage either to the marriage itself or to the larger context of social relations in which it is embedded. Sibling-in-law joking helps to accomplish this.

If, for example, a Mossi is irritated by his wife's performance of some aspect of her duties in the household or the field, he need not address her directly in order to communicate his dissatisfaction and release the tension he feels. To do so in a culture which places a high value on indirection in emo-

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tionally charged relationships would be such a serious breach of etiquette as to threaten permanent damage, if not actual dissolution, of the marriage relationship (Hammond 1959: 187; 1963: 21). Thus if he has been angered over his wife's frequent failure to prepare his food properly, or to present it to him before his kinsmen with a proper show of deference, he need not and should not reprimand her directly. He need only wait until she is visited by one of her younger sisters when he can call out:

Eh! Here come women more worthless than my wife! What do you want here? Are you looking for *sacabo* (a millet cake)? Who eats well here? Do you want an old groundnut? No one here has tasted *sacabo* with sauce since your sister came to my house!

By expressing his resentment of his wife in this way the husband is able—indirectly—to communicate the cause of his displeasure, to elicit support for himself and social pressure against her, and to achieve harmlessly the reduction of his hostile feelings. All this he accomplishes without risking the sort of direct and angry confrontation which might have a permanently damaging effect on their relationship. The wife's younger sisters cannot take offense at this joking, and they can be relied upon to relay the husband's complaints to their sister—if, indeed, she does not herself overhear the joking exchange. Furthermore, since a wife's younger sisters are usually aware of the sources of her grievance with her husband, they can use the same means to communicate to him the reason for her resentment and consequent failure to perform her domestic tasks to his satisfaction.

Similarly, when a man's younger brothers come into the presence of his wife, she is expected to insult them in the same way—to deride with humor their appearance, their lack of energy, their skill at their work, or their intelligence. The expectation and acceptance of such joking provides her with an indirect means of criticizing her husband as well. By saving her grievances until she is in the company of her husband's younger siblings, she may, within the context of joking, pour out her resentment at the way she is treated, revealing succinctly the causes of her dissatisfaction. His brothers can be relied upon to relay to her husband what she has said, if he has not himself overheard the exchange. If he recognizes as valid the criticism implied by her joking remarks, he may correct those aspects of his behavior which are frustrating or unsatisfactory to her. Indeed, if the criticisms are justified, his kinsmen are likely to exert pressure on him to do so. The joking provides the woman with a means of channeling in a culturally acceptable manner the aggressive feelings generated by her frustrations. And her husband's younger brothers, by retorting with hostile banter of the same sort, can convey to her the dissatisfaction of both her husband and their other kinsmen with her comportment, thus providing her, too, with a chance to mend her ways.

By these means both marriage partners have an equal opportunity to evaluate the content of the other's criticism and, if necessary, to alter their behavior accordingly. Since this is achieved through joking, the result of such an exchange is the maintenance of communication, the exercise of a measure of social control, and the mutual reduction of frustration without the face-to-face conflict that might result in permanent damage to both the marriage relation-

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ship itself and the contract of interlineage co-operation and solidarity which every marriage serves to establish or reinforce.[4]

Although this joking interchange is seen in its full implications when there is an immediate source of dissension between marriage partners, it may also occur in the absence of any specific difficulty. Then it is apparently indulged in simply because it is expected, and for the pleasure which the Mossi, like all people, derive from an occasion to exercise their wit. It is this relatively disinterested joking which has been most frequently described in the literature, and this may account for the failure of many scholars to perceive more fully the important social and psychological functions which joking may fulfill.

Conclusion

This paper has been written as a tentative step toward a reformulation of the various and disparate observations on joking contained in the anthropological literature. I have contended that an analysis of this literature indicates that wherever joking is institutionalized the structural relationship between the participants tends to be characterized by five significantly interrelated structural attributes: separation, reciprocity, ambivalence, equality, and independence. I have also indicated that such joking may serve as an adjustive mechanism by providing for the concurrent maintenance of communication, control, and the culturally harmless catharsis of potentially disruptive emotions.

A variety of forms of institutionalized joking found among the Mossi of Yatenga have been cited to illustrate these points. However, I suggest that the factors which cluster with this reliance on joking as an adjustive mechanism are not unique to the Mossi. Institutionalized joking reported for other parts of Africa appears to be structurally and processually similar.

NOTES

1. A shorter version of this paper was read at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association held in San Francisco in November, 1963. It is based on field research conducted among the Mossi from 1954 to 1956 with the assistance of a Ford Foundation Fellowship.

2. Marriage between the members of descent groups united by a joking alliance is regarded by the Mossi as highly desirable, apparently in recognition of the useful role of joking as an adjustive mechanism. Once such a marriage is contracted, however, Ego and his wife must take care that their joking insults are directed only at the younger kinsmen of the other and that the insulting remarks are personal. It would, for example, be acceptable for Ego to call his wife's younger sister a disreputable shrew but dangerous to call her a slave (a term of disrespect used frequently in joking between sibs). To refer to her as a slave would cast unflattering aspersions on her entire kin group, including her mother and father, with whom, in their new status as parents-in-law, Ego may no longer joke.

3. I believe that joking is also institutionalized between the Mossi and the Yarse, a highly acculturated ethnic minority of Mande origin who live throughout Yatenga. There is also joking between the Mossi and the indigenous blacksmith caste. Unfortunately my data on these two instances of joking are inadequate.

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4. The importance of sibling-in-law joking as a means of regulating conflict in the Mossi marriage relationship is further substantiated by the results of comparative research conducted among the Mossi resettled at the Office du Niger in the neighboring Republic of Mali.

The Mossi, who were first forcibly and later voluntarily resettled in Mali, were allocated farm land as elementary family units without regard for their extended kinship affiliations. Thus a man often found himself living in unaccustomed "isolation," in the company only of his wife or wives and children, and otherwise surrounded by total strangers. Although the potential for conflict in the marriage relationship remained high, or was even augmented by the stresses of adjusting to a changed milieu, sibling-in-law joking, the institution through which such tension is traditionally regulated among the Mossi, was no longer operative. Unless the younger siblings of each spouse had accompanied them to the resettlement area, those individuals were absent to whom they might have communicated their grievances and expressed their aggressive sentiments in a socially harmless, psychologically satisfactory, and culturally acceptable way.

As the traditionally sanctioned means of dealing with tension resulting from marital conflict was no longer available to the Mossi resettled in Mali, there occurred an increase in the incidence both of violence in marital disputes and of separation and divorce.

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